



China Perspectives

2010/1 | 2010

Independent Chinese Cinema: Filming in the "Space of the People"

Editorial

Sebastian Veg and Judith Pernin



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5045>
ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 21 April 2010
ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Sebastian Veg and Judith Pernin, « Editorial », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2010/1 | 2010, Online since 22 April 2010, connection on 14 November 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5045>

Editorial

SEBASTIAN VEG AND JUDITH PERNIN

Since its beginnings in China in the 1990s, the current now known as “independent film” (*duli dianying*) has sought a space for creation, metaphorically but also concretely. While entering the mainstream circuit depended on authorisations granted by the Film Bureau, funding from a state-owned studio, and distribution through the nationwide network of theatres, young directors tried to open up an alternative space for making and showing films. This space was, to an extent, a private space: films were made by groups of friends or classmates who both contributed to financing and acted or worked on the set. They were first screened in homes or universities. By representing private spaces and private stories in films such as *Xiao Wu* and *Unknown Pleasures*, Jia Zhangke defined “independence” as a set of preoccupations that could not easily be integrated into an overarching national or political narrative. In this sense, the concern with private space can be understood in the context of young directors breaking away from the central role in society that Chinese intellectuals have aspired to during much of the twentieth century. However, private stories have never precluded them from addressing social concerns, whether related to the “lower strata” of society (*diceng*), the environment (the Three Gorges dam) or the blind spots in recent Chinese history (the Anti-Rightist Movement or the demise of collectivism) – and in this sense, from taking a public stance. Independent cinema can therefore be situated at the margins of the public and the private, in what we have proposed to term the “space of the people,” in reference to the Chinese notion of *minjian* (less literally translated as “unofficial”).

This special feature developed out of a series of yearly seminars and panel discussions on recent Chinese cinema, jointly organised by the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China and the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF) since 2007, bringing together directors, critics, and academics. The editors hereby extend their thanks to Li Cheuk-to and the HKIFF, who effectively opened a “space” for this fruitful exchange. The present issue reflects the inclusive orientation of the discussions, in

that it adopts the category favoured by Chinese directors (sometimes questioned by critics) of “independent film.” For this reason, the special feature is also divided into two parts: the section devoted to research articles is followed by a set of documents that will make available to the general reader the reflexive analysis that some independent Chinese directors have developed regarding their own work.

The first part collects three research articles devoted to independent cinema. Esther Cheung explores the ethical dimensions of Jia Zhangke’s realism and its unique “appeal,” arguing that it is grounded both in a geographical space of authenticity and in the metaphorical space of a performative “plea.” Judith Pernin offers a general analysis of space in independent Chinese documentaries, showing how spaces are used both on and off screen to construct a sphere of the “*minjian*.” Jie Li presents a monographic analysis of the documentary film-maker Zhao Liang, in which she explores the spaces of power and the ways in which film observes the powerless afloat within these spaces.

The second part of the feature contains a translation of three seminal articles by the director Jia Zhangke originally published in the early 2000s. “Irrepressible Images” reworks the themes Jia first touched on in “Now that We Have VCDs and Digital Video Cameras” and “The Age of Amateur Cinema is About to Return” and weaves them into a general narrative of how independent cinema emerged in China. These texts are followed by a compilation of materials taken from the 2009 seminar, including a panel discussion with Jia Zhangke and an interview with the director Ning Ying. Director and academic Ai Xiaoming introduces her approach to documentary film and social problems, situated on the more politicised wing of independent film. In conclusion, Li Cheuk-to, Wong Ain-ling, and Jacob Wong offer the HKIFF’s perspective, with its incomparable vantage point, on the emergence of a new Chinese cinema over the past 20 years. As the result of a fruitful exchange between many people with different approaches, this special feature endeavours to offer some new perspectives on the ever-growing field of research on contemporary Chinese cinema. •